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## Telling your Story to the Media: Guidelines for Victims and Survivors

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Telling your Story to the Media:

## Guidelines for Victims & Survivors



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Arts & Humanities  
Research Council



The Commission for  
Victims & Survivors

# Letter of Introduction

These guidelines were developed as part of the 'Voice, Agency and Blame: Victimhood and the Imagined Community' / 'Victims and Dealing with the Past' project – a two-year initiative funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and based at Queen's University Belfast.

The wider project explores the relationship between victims and 'dealing with the past' in Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland, both victimhood and legacy issues have become highly politicised. This has, for example, given rise to the question of 'who' is a victim of the conflict, what victimhood 'means' and ultimately, how victims' needs – and which victims' needs are met. By examining these questions and others through the lenses of voice, agency and blame, this project sought to produce a more comprehensive and multi-faceted understanding of the politics of victimhood in Northern Ireland <sup>1</sup>.

Working with the Commission for Victims and Survivors Northern Ireland (CVSNI), over 60 interviews with victims and survivors across Northern Ireland were carried out. In addition, we also spoke at length with a range of distinguished journalists and editors about the challenges of reporting on victim and survivor related issues.

Project team members – Dr. Cheryl Lawther, Professor Kieran McEvoy and Dr. Lauren Dempster are all based at the School of Law, Queen's University Belfast.

At its core and in addition to academic work, this project has a 'real world' dimension and is trying to ensure that the voices of victims are heard, respected and acted upon in Northern Ireland and beyond. These media guidelines are a practical expression of that ethical commitment. They are informed by the interviews we carried out with

<sup>1</sup> While preparing these guidelines we were acutely aware of the sensitivities of language. After consideration, the following definitions were adopted:

## **Victim**

The use of the term victim follows that contained in the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. That is: '(a), someone who is or has been physically or psychologically injured as a result of or in consequence of a conflict-related incident; (b) someone who provides a substantial amount of care on a regular basis for an individual mentioned in paragraph (a); (c) or someone who has been bereaved as a result of or in consequence of a conflict-related event' (Art.3, para.1).

## **Conflict**

The term conflict is used to describe the violence that occurred in Northern Ireland from 1968-1998. It reflects the scale and intensity of that violence which resulted in over 3,500 deaths and over 47,000 injuries. It includes violence which involved non-state actors (paramilitaries) and state actors (security forces).

victims, many of whom told us about their good and bad experiences of dealing with journalists in Northern Ireland. We also took on board the views of journalists and editors about this complex and sensitive work. Finally, we looked for and were surprised by the comparative absence of best practice guidelines in the aftermath of political violence.

**The process for the production of the guidelines was as follows.**

1. The award-winning journalist Susan McKay was appointed to prepare and write the guidelines. Consultation was key to that process.
2. In addition to specific questions on media engagement asked during interview by the project team members, a further round of interviews with members and representatives of victims' groups and journalists and editors was conducted by Susan.
3. This was coupled with two presentations and feedback sessions with the Victims Forum, the hosting of a CVSNI Policy Seminar – with discussion and feedback, and the presentation of draft versions of the guidelines at the Victims and Dealing with the Past project conference held at Queen's University Belfast, May 2018.
4. In June 2018 a further round of consultation was conducted with all funded victims' and survivors' groups in Northern Ireland and the guidelines were again presented at the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) Belfast and Dart Centre Europe 'Do No Harm' Journalism Conference.

**The end result was the production of four documents:**

- Guidelines on media engagement for victims and survivors;
- Guidelines on representing and engaging with victims and survivors/ legacy issues for journalists, editors and educators;
- A set of 'essential' tips on media engagement for victims and survivors;
- A set of 'essential' tips on representing and engaging with victims and survivors/legacy issues for journalists, editors and educators.

These guidelines are designed to be of immediate value and practical use and we encourage you to share them amongst your networks.

For further information about the wider project, please feel free to contact us at: <https://victimsandthepast.org>

# Endorsements

## Commissioner for Victims and Survivors Northern Ireland

### Judith Thompson

As Commissioner for Victims and Survivors (NI) I wholeheartedly endorse the publication of this guidance for victims and survivors to assist in their interaction with the print or broadcast media relating to their experience of the Troubles/Conflict. Victims and survivors are frequently asked to speak with the media about their often emotionally challenging and distressing lived experiences. The media guidance contains sensible and practical advice that can assist individuals and families in their preparation before, during and after conducting interviews with the media. I would hope that through supporting these guidelines, our local media continue to evolve the development of trauma-aware journalism that engages with victims and survivors with the profound dignity, empathy and respect that they need and deserve.

### Victims and Survivors Forum: Media Guidance for Victims and Survivors

The Victims and Survivors Forum welcome the production of these guidance for victims and survivors to assist individuals and families where they decide to engage with the print or broadcast media relating to their experience of the Conflict/Troubles.

The guidance can provide an important source of advice and support for many individuals and families in both their decision to engage with the media and in their preparation to conduct interviews with journalists and broadcasters. The guidance is very timely in the context of establishing new processes to deal with our troubled past. Strong media interest in reporting on the Conflict/Troubles will continue to grow with increasing requests to speak to victims and their families about the impact of historical investigation and information recovery processes. These guidance will provide a practical and helpful reference to many people in the months and years ahead.

## Dart Centre Europe for Journalism and Trauma

No society can flourish if survivors and victims of violence don't feel empowered to speak. Talking to the media can be a positive experience, but it is one that requires careful thought and navigation. These guidelines contain important advice on how to decide on whether to speak, whom to speak to, and how to remain in control of one's personal story as far as it is possible to.

Over recent years, there has been a major shift in the public's understanding of trauma. Most journalists want to get this right and work sensitively with victims and survivors. These guidelines - along with the accompanying document written for journalists - are a help to reporters too. Interviews go better, the clearer everybody is on what the process involves and how to work through any misunderstandings which might arise.

### National Union of Journalists (NUJ) Note of Recommendation

As Assistant General Secretary I commend the work of Queen's University Belfast in developing guidelines to assist media practitioners in coverage of stories relating to the legacy of the Troubles. For the families of victims and for survivors of violence time does not erase painful memories of deeply traumatic events.

Media practitioners must always be mindful of the impact which coverage of such events can have on individuals and families. The guidelines will assist victims, survivors and their families in dealing with the media.

Read in conjunction with the NUJ Code Of Conduct the guidelines will assist journalists, editors and students to approach these important stories sensitively and with the utmost compassion.

Seamus Dooley  
Assistant General Secretary  
National Union of Journalists, UK and Ireland.

# Guidelines for **Victims and Survivors**

Telling your story in the media can be a positive and empowering experience. A journalist should work respectfully with you, listening with care, and reporting you fairly and accurately. You may feel you want to affirm the truth of your own story. You may want to do justice to the person who was killed or harmed, or correct a flawed version of history. Hearing about your experience may be helpful to others. Speaking out in the media can influence public thinking about violence, trauma, conflict, and the needs of victims and survivors.

However, it is important to step into the public domain with your eyes open. Speaking out can have unintended consequences. These guidelines are intended to help you decide if you want to speak to a journalist, and if you do, to help you achieve what you want from speaking to him or her. There are also guidelines for journalists on interviewing victims and survivors which should ensure that they treat you with sensitivity and respect. Ask the reporter who wishes to interview you if their publication or broadcasting outlet has adopted them. The guidelines have been written in consultation with, among others, the Commission for Victims and Survivors NI.

## **1. If you do not wish to give an interview:**

- It is ok to say no, and you don't need to give reasons.
- No one has the right to enter your home without your permission.
- You have a right not to be harassed or put under pressure. You can complain to the editor or broadcaster for whom a journalist is working, or contact a victims group and ask them to do so on your behalf.

## **2. If you are considering speaking out in the media:**

- Be clear in your own mind. What is it you want or need to say? What are you hoping to achieve by doing this? Is this objective realistic?
- Be prepared for the fact that when the story appears, some people may be supportive, but others may react with indifference or hostility.
- Some social media follow up will be positive – some will not. You've told your story – don't feel you have to engage with social media bullies.
- What newspaper, radio/TV station, blog or other outlet do you trust? Is there a particular journalist whose work you like? If so, make an approach – ask if they will discuss it with you.
- If a reporter contacts you from a media organisation or newspaper you dislike or distrust, it is probably unwise to proceed.
- What will be the probable impact on your family, friends and others? If there are those who will oppose you speaking out, does this matter to you? Do you need to discuss with them what you plan to do?
- Don't use the media to hurt other people or for revenge. You may regret it when the harm is done, and they may retaliate.
- If you need time to think over a request for an interview, say so. It may be helpful to talk it over with someone you trust, a friend or someone in a victims group before you decide.
- Don't agree to an interview simply because a victims group or someone who has been helpful to you asks you to do it, unless you are sure it is what you want.
- If a reporter approaches you, feel free to ask questions. Why you? Why now? Has something happened? What is the angle? Will other people be interviewed? Will there be photographs? Will there be input from the person who killed or injured your loved one, for example, or any organization representing their point of view?

## **3. If you decide to go ahead and do an interview:**

- Be yourself and tell your story – it is important. Tell the reporter how you want to be described.
- Make sure you have the reporter's professional contact details.
- Have a trusted friend or professional with you during an interview if this makes you feel safer and more comfortable.
- Record the interview if you want to have your own record. This will also give you evidence to complain if you are quoted inaccurately.



- If you go on radio or TV, record the programme. You may not remember what you said, or what others said to or about you.
- Don't talk "off the record" – unless you are sure you can trust the journalist.
- You can decline to answer any question which you feel is irrelevant or insensitive and you can withdraw your consent or bring an interview to an end if you are not comfortable.
- Don't feel that you have to go into the full detail of your story unless this is an in-depth interview and you have agreed to it.
- Don't lie to a journalist or conceal significant information – doing so may undermine the journalist's confidence in your story or even lead to a legal case.
- Remember that if a journalist asks you to verify statements it is not because they do not believe you, but because they are required to check the facts.
- Journalists are often under pressure – you can ask if they will call you and let you know what quotes they will be using, but be prepared for them to say this is not possible because of time constraints and the editorial process. It is best to ask them at the end of the interview to go over it with you. At this point you can make changes.
- If, after the reporter has left, you want to change a quote or add something, do it quickly.
- Most journalists are just doing their job to the best of their ability. You have a right to express anger or frustration in the course of an interview, or to bring it to an end, but do not become aggressive.
- If you are asked to travel for an interview, ask for your costs.
- If a journalist asks for photographs or documents and you are happy for them to be published, try to give copies or get the journalist to photograph them rather than take the originals. If possible, do not let anyone take away any precious items.

#### **4. Afterwards:**

- If you need some time to compose yourself after an interview, ask.
- You may find being interviewed more painful and emotional than you had anticipated – make sure you have someone to look after you afterwards.
- Don't expect too much – going public may not yield obvious results. Some other big story may break, pushing yours to a less prominent position and taking attention away. However, the story can become part of a narrative that builds momentum towards change.
- You may be asked to do follow up interviews – only do so if you

want to.

- If you are treated well and you are happy with how your interview is presented, let the journalist know, and let other people know. This encourages good practice in the media.

## Suggestions for victims and survivors groups

It is in everybody's interest to have good relationships between advocacy groups and the media. Chances are, they respect your clients as much as you do. They may have a lot of experience and sensitivity.

These suggestions are intended to maximize the chances of you ensuring your clients are treated properly, and that you get effective publicity for the stories your organization needs to tell.

### **1. Creating a constructive context for work with the media:**

- Seek to have discussions with journalists and editors – make sure they are aware of the issues that need attention, and the sensitivities involved in working with victims and survivors. Ask them to adopt the guidelines.
- Journalists may approach you asking if you can provide someone for interview. This is good practice. Cold calling can upset people.
- If appropriate, ask clients if they may be willing to take part in media work.
- Be aware of gender - encourage women to speak out.
- If you don't think a journalist or their outlet is trustworthy, don't work with them.
- Cultivate relationships with media outlets and individual journalists who are serious, ethical, sensitive and effective in their work on your issues, and build a data bank of good journalists and media outlets.
- Criticise bad journalism and praise good journalism.
- Advise journalists about sensitivities in relation to stories, around, for example, contested narratives and language that will cause offence.
- Provide good, clear and reliable information and guidance to the media. If they are interviewing someone you may wish to suggest additional potential interviews. Provide background information on events, and photographic and audio material if you have it. Provide

links to relevant material on your website.

- If a big piece is to appear or be broadcast, plan social media activity to promote it.

## **2. Supporting clients in engaging with the media:**

- Be prepared to offer non-directive advice on engaging with the media to your clients. Talk them through the media guidelines for victims and survivors. Make sure they do not have unrealistic expectations about the outcomes.
- Encourage or provide training for victims/survivors to develop media awareness skills. If there is something they are worried about discussing, let them practise how they'll deal with it during an interview.
- If possible, offer facilities for journalists to interview victims and survivors on your premises, or accompaniment to studios, and offer for one of your staff or volunteers to sit in on the interview if this is requested by your client.
- Offer follow up support – going public can be traumatic and can to a surprising degree awaken old feelings of pain and distress. Monitor social media follow up and let people know what is being said.
- If someone has mental health issues or is particularly vulnerable, be prepared to suggest that going to the media is not necessarily a good idea.
- Make sure no one feels pressurised by you into giving an interview. Some clients are grateful for your help and may feel they need to repay you even if they really are not comfortable about speaking out.
- Don't try to control what people say to journalists.

### 3. Redress and follow up:

- Familiarise yourselves with media law, Ofcom regulations, NUJ guidelines and Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) rulings in UK/Press Ombudsman rulings in ROI.
- If you wish to complain on behalf of a client, report bad practice to the NUJ, the media organisation, and the IPSO, or involve lawyers and police if extreme harassment or misrepresentation makes this necessary. Advise the CVSNI.
- If a journalist has done a good job, keep them updated with any developments in a story or campaign and suggest other ideas to them.



